

Reader

Social Studies

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Mexico's Mother Culture: The Olmecs



by Eva Moreno

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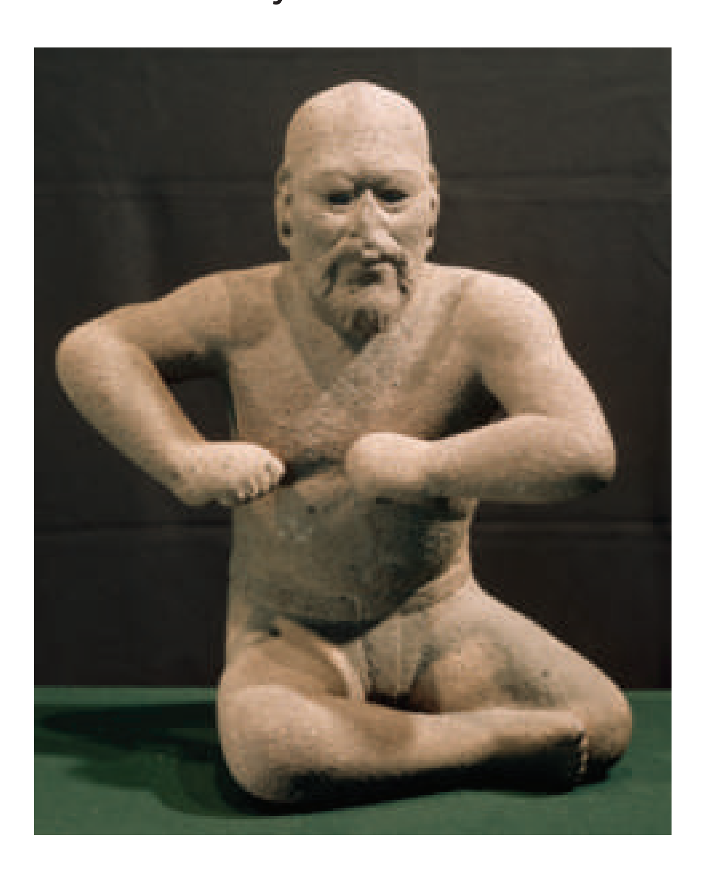


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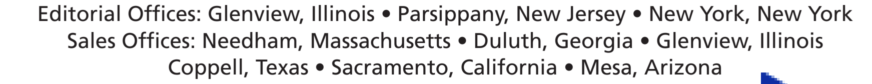


Mexico's Mother Culture: The Olmecs

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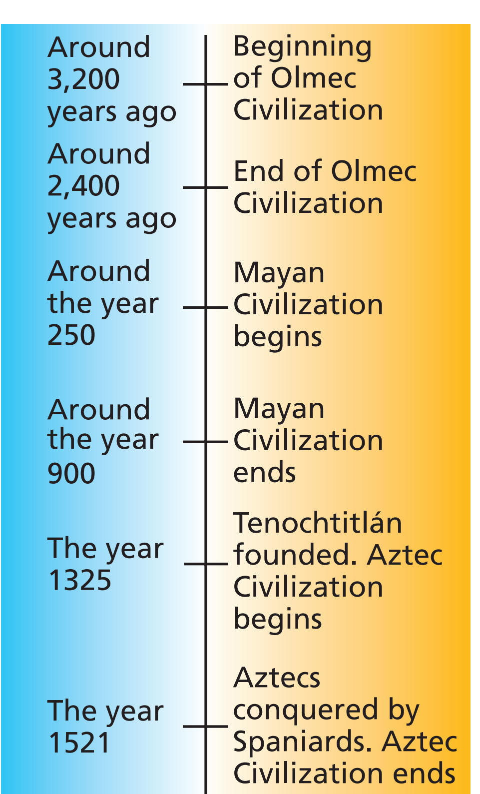


Mexico's Mother Culture

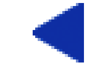
Did you know that great civilizations existed in Mexico long ago? The oldest of these civilizations is that of the Olmecs of the Gulf Coast of Mexico. This civilization began about 3,200 years ago. It ended about 2,400 years ago. The Olmec civilization is called the "mother culture" of civilizations that developed in Mexico. This means that it came first. It also means that it influenced the civilizations that followed.



Time line and map of the civilizations that existed in Mexico









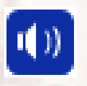
El Castillo (The Castle), the main pyramid at the Mayan city of Chichén Itzá

The Aztecs and the Mayas, two of Mexico's most famous civilizations, were influenced by Olmec art and architecture, religious beliefs, and customs. Both the Aztecs and the Mayas built glorious cities with magnificent pyramids and temples. The ruins of these cities are visited by people from all over the world.

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architecture: the art and style of building





Archaeologists (ar kee OL uh jists) know a lot about the Aztec and Mayan civilizations. The Olmec civilization is more mysterious because it is so old. For example, nobody knows the real name of the people in this civilization. "Olmec" is a name that was given to the people by archaeologists in the twentieth century.

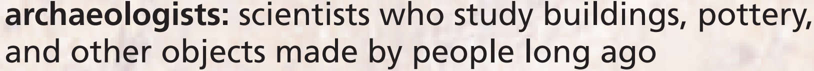
There is evidence that the Olmecs were the very first culture in Mexico that can be called a civilization. At a time when other cultures were farming, fishing, and hunting, the Olmecs were doing all that *and* building cities.



Did You Know? **What Is a Civilization?**

A civilization is a society of people that has reached an advanced stage of development. In a civilization, people do the following:

- Build cities and create art
- Have a society with different classes of people, such as rulers and workers
- Have a system of writing
- Trade with other people living far away



archaeologists: scientists who study buildings, pottery, and other objects made by people long ago

trade: buy and sell







The Great Pyramid at La Venta is covered with jungle.

What Olmec Ruins Tell Us

The Olmecs built many cities in the lowlands along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The largest cities are at San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes. Archaeologists have studied the Olmec ruins in those places. Many other cities have been discovered, but they have not yet been completely excavated.



Extend Language **Suffix *-ist***

The suffix *-ist* identifies a person who does something.

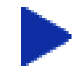
An archaeolog*ist* works in the field of archaeology. What do you call people who work in the following fields?

biology   psychology

Hint: drop the final *-y* before adding the suffix.



excavated: dug out





The ruins found in these cities show that there were two classes of people in Olmec society, rulers and workers. There were only a few rulers. The majority of people were workers. The workers believed that their rulers were gods.

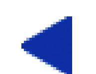
The rulers and workers lived very different lives. The rulers wore rich costumes with feather capes, tall headdresses, and fine jewelry. They lived in stone houses in the cities, where the religious buildings were.



The Olmec figure known as 'The Governor' wears a cape and an elaborate headdress.

The workers wore light clothing and some simple jewelry. Many workers lived in villages around the cities. Their homes were usually made of mud walls, with palm leaves on the roofs.

rulers: people in charge of a group of people







This colossal head of stone was found at San Lorenzo, one of the oldest Olmec sites.

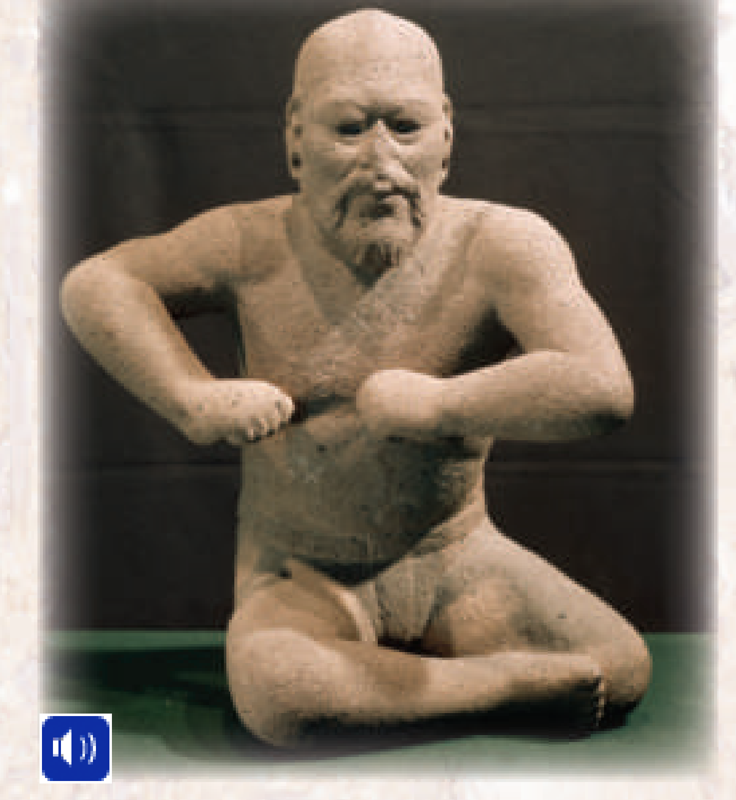
Olmec Religion and Art

Religion was very important to the Olmecs. We know this because the most important buildings in their cities were temples to honor their gods and palaces for their rulers.

Art also was important to the Olmecs, especially sculpture and carving. The best-known examples of Olmec art are huge stone sculptures known as "colossal heads." Archaeologists believe that the colossal heads are sculptures of rulers. Seventeen heads have been found. Some weigh as much as 40 tons and stand 10 feet tall! The heads are made of volcanic rock that had to be transported from many miles away.

colossal: enormous





This is a figure of an Olmec wrestler.

What Happened to the Olmecs

Archaeologists do not know how the Olmec civilization ended. They know that about 2,400 years ago or earlier, the Olmecs abandoned some of their largest cities. Other Olmec cities continued for a time, but the Olmec civilization slowly disappeared.

As archaeologists study the Olmec ruins, they are learning more and more. The Olmec ruins they find still fill us with wonder and curiosity about Mexico's mother culture.

abandoned: left



Talk About It

1. Why is the Olmec civilization called the "mother culture" of civilizations in Mexico?
2. What were the differences between the rulers and the workers in the Olmec civilization?

Write About It

3. Look at the different kinds of Olmec art shown in the photographs. Choose the kind that you like best, and describe it on a separate sheet of paper. Tell why this kind of art is your favorite.

Extend Language

In the phrase *fairly advanced,* the word *fairly* means "to some degree" or "in some amount." To say that a day's weather is fairly warm is like saying it is somewhat warm. But *fairly* also has a different meaning. It can mean "in a fair or just way," as in the sentence *We treated everyone fairly.* Tell which meaning of *fairly* is used in each sentence.

We arrived *fairly* early. He did not behave *fairly.*

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